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Christianity and Islam among the Mossi[1]

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797 THE twin forces of Christianity and Islam are both seriously contending for the conversion of the pagan masses of the Western Sudan. Islam first penetrated this region during the 11th century and succeeded in converting many people to its faith. Christianity arrived on the scene only 60 years ago, and has not had the time to win many converts. However, there remained many societies in this area which were largely pagan until European conquests exposed them almost simultaneously to the influences of both Christianity and Islam. One such society, the Mossi, has been described as the principal island of resistance to Islam in the Sudan (Gouilly 1952:52). André (1924:31) states that the Mossi "offered to the Animists an irreducible rampart against the invasion of Islam." And Delafosse concurs that the Mossi "seem to have been particularly hostile to Islam which has made no progress among them since the Hegira. And although an appreciable number of Moslem strangers (Yarsé) lived among them, they have almost all remained pagans" (1912, vol. 3:187).

The first Christian Catholic missionaries arrived in Mossi territory in 1900, just four years after French conquest. These missionaries were kindly if fearfully received by the people, who gave them land for building a mission and for cultivating crops. The Mossi helped the Christians cultivate these crops and willingly allowed the children to attend the mission school. Nevertheless, when the missionaries tried to convert the children to Catholicism, the parents objected and withdrew the children from school (Socquet 1956:62). The Protestant American "Assemblies of God" mission first worked among the Mossi in 1926, and in 1931 they reported that the outlook for conversions was "hopeful" (Cooksey and McLeish 1931:215). But from 1926 to date, the Protestants have made negligible progress in their conversions. There are today about 155,000 Moslems, 26,000 Catholics, and 1,760 Protestants in a Mossi population of over 1,500,000. These figures attest to the fact that despite a long history of resistance to foreign religious systems, many Mossi are now abandoning their traditional religion. But the figures also show that while Islam is gaining many converts, the Catholics are making only slight progress, and the American Protestants hardly any at all. There are obviously many reasons for the differential advance of these three religious systems. In this paper I will examine and analyze the processes by which these religious systems attempt to gain converts, and delineate the reasons for their differential success.

173 105 [186] The Mossi who are now feeling the impact of external religious influences represent the unique example of a Sudanese group which has preserved its ethnic identity and political autonomy through all the vicissitudes of Sudanic history until French conquest in 1896. Tradition records that the first Mossi

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643 Moro Naba Wobogo as chief of Doulougou, but this chief was assas-
636 sinated. Thereafter the Moro Naba placed his own brother as chief
175 of Doulougou district only to have him deposed by the French in 1932
662 for abusing his power. Now the Moro Naba again turned to a descendant of Koabga Wedrago and named him chief, but the French also deposed and jailed this chief for incapacity. Finally in 1935, the Moro Naba named his own son, Etienne Kongo, as chief, and this man was still chief when I left the Mossi in 1957. The interesting feature of this succession is that the Moro Naba confined it to three specific families: his own, that of ex-Moro Naba Wobogo, and that of the ancient chiefly line of Doulougou. In no case did Moro Naba Kom attempt to elevate to chieftainship the son or relative of a man whom the French deposed. He named a chief from another one of the chiefly families, and when a member of this line was deposed, he quickly turned to another one. In this way, the Moro Naba never gave the French any cause for thinking that he disapproved of their action by placing as chief a relative of the man they had deposed. This type of succession was only possible because of the flexibility in the Mossi mode of chiefly succession. Furthermore, the district people readily accepted the chiefs appointed by the Moro Naba because he never deviated from their cultural expectations, or violated the accepted norm of succession.

636 A more serious attempt on the part of the French to influence the
643 traditional political organization of the Mossi came when they tried to enroll the sons of the Moro Naba and those of other chiefs in a special school in order to make these boys adjuncts in their administration. The eldest sons of the Moro Naba and of the officials around Wagadougou were all sent to school because they were well known to the French.
636 However, in the rural districts, the chiefs hesitated to send their eldest
643 sons to school. First of all, they regarded this plan as another form of
186 forced labor from which their sons might never return. And secondly,
662 because they also feared that if these youths did return as educated men, they would have been Christianized, and thereby would have been unable or unwilling to perform the important roles which chiefs had vis-a-vis the ancestors. To palliate the French the chiefs sent their youngest or motherless sons to schools, or in some cases substituted the sons

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of their former serfs and slaves who were theoretically also "their sons." 636

The sons of the chiefs and those boys of commoner, serf, and slave 643
origins who had gone to the mission schools became the first group 186
of educated Mossi. The educated commoners had no function in the 662
traditional political system and were readily absorbed by the local French bureaucracy. However, since these persons were not sufficient to fill the administration's need of literate Mossi, the sons of chiefs and even the carefully coached missionary catechists were encouraged to join the civil service. The result of this policy was that almost no literate Mossi were elected to district and village chieftainship before the end of the second world war.

The relatively rapid political development which came to French 636
Africa as a result of the Brazzaville Conference of 1944 and the after- 646
math of the war presented the traditional Mossi political hierarchy with a grave problem: "Who should represent the Mossi people in the new French assemblies and councils both in Africa and in metropolitan France?" There were three possibilities: They could be represented by educated foreign Africans; by the educated sons of Mossi chiefs whose loyalties were not known; or by the potentially hostile educated Mossi commoners. The first hint of the Moro Naba's policy was re- 636
vealed when the Africans were called upon to select delegates to send 646
to the French Constituent Assembly on October 21, 1945. Houphouet 666
[Boigny], who anticipated the determination of the Mossi to support 662
their own candidate, had vainly taken the precaution of sending an emissary to the Moro Naba prior to the September 8 meeting [which the Africans had called to plan strategy]. The Moro Naba proved unamenable to the suggestion that he support Houphouet's candidacy, and insisted on backing one of his own loyals vassals, Tenga Wedraogo or Baloum Naba.[8] This action showed clearly that the Mossi had planned to use educated chiefs who could also represent them in the assemblies. The flexible pattern of Mossi political succession enabled the Moro Naba and his advisers to meet this new contingency. In three districts, Manga, Sapone, and Kaya, the eldest sons of deceased chiefs were passed over, and their younger educated brothers were elected to the vacant chieftainships. There were some hard feelings over the appointment of Sapone, but the reason given was that the new chief was partially blind in one eye. I have no data for the reaction of

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in the adoption of this currency as the medium of exchange in most markets.[11] The one-franc piece and coins of smaller denominations were those most often used because they were ideally suited to the petty trading that took place in the markets. The franc even became the standard of value in the larger markets, but one receives only 3 local francs for a five-franc note C.F.A. or seven francs for a ten-franc note C.F.A. These changes in value seem to occur by common concensus, since it is impossible to discover who it was that changed the exchange rate. A further fact is that many Europeans remain unaware of these changes since they seldom go to the local markets themselves. When they do go and insist upon the official exchange rate, the "unofficial" market chief appears and takes over the situation, giving the *nansara* ("conqueror" or "master," the way in which every European is regarded) what he wishes.

While the equivalence between the cowrie, the old brass franc, and the franc C.F.A. works splendidly when products are sold in small quantities, I found the system difficult to understand when more expensive goods are traded. For example, when one buys meat, an expensive item, the butcher accepts either the official francs or the local currency and gives change in both. The difficulty here is that since the butcher uses no scales, one is never sure about the price or about the system of value the butcher is using. The most that can be done if one does not receive as much meat as expected is to haggle with the butcher until he adds more. However, this haggling leaves unresolved the problem of the value of one's official money in terms of the unofficial money, and the product which it is intended to buy. One is thus left with the *impression* that there must be an internal consistency to the exchange system, or barring this, that the local people accept the system as it is as a matter of expediency. On the other hand, the vendors of products with fixed prices such as matches, cigarettes and the like appear to make differential profits when they

(11) Mangin (1921 : 61–62) reports that the Mossi had great difficulty obtaining the five-franc piece which they needed to pay their taxes because the "Europeans who live in Mossi country, including all the riflemen and provincial guards do not put into circulation a quarter of the five-franc pieces which are required each year from the natives. At first the Mossi were taken by surprise and had to give 10 or even 15,000 cowries to obtain this famous coin, this *greegree* which was to free them from all difficulties with the white man. And yet at the official rate of exchange this coin is worth 5,000 cowries. Nowadays it is very difficult to find a native willing to give this much for one of the coins. The usual exchange rate varies from 3,500 to 4,000 cowries: the French currency has been depreciated. This must mean that the natives find elsewhere —through trading— this indispensable coin. They know that the tax must be paid every year, and instead of waiting till the last minute, as soon as they have accumulated the necessary cowries they secure the five-franc pieces from those who have fetched them from far away. The coins flow into the country, and the rate of exchange goes down."